

## **National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging**

The Honorable Dorcas Hardy  
Chairman, Policy Committee  
White House Conference on Aging  
Administration on Aging  
Department of Health and Human Services  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Hon. Hardy:

On behalf of the members of The National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging, I would like to congratulate you on your selection as Chairman of the Policy Committee, White House Conference on Aging.

Established in 1991, The National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging comprises over 50 members representing professional, consumer and government organizations with expertise in mental health and aging issues. Its goal is to provide opportunities for member organizations to work together towards improving the availability and quality of mental health preventive and treatment services to older Americans and their families through education, research and increased public awareness. A listing of member organizations is enclosed.

Highlights of past Coalition activities include *Efficacy and Effectiveness of Mental Health Services for Older Persons*, a 1993 Capitol Hill Forum; sponsorship of the 1995 White House Conference on Aging Mini-Conference on Emerging Issues in Mental Health and Aging and subsequent publication, Emerging Issues in Mental Health and Aging (American Psychological Association, 1995); and a major ongoing project, primarily funded by the Center for Mental Health Services to develop state and local mental health and aging coalitions. At present at least 30 states have some type of mental health and/or substance abuse and aging coalition. These networks increase public awareness of older adult mental health and substance abuse needs and work to improve services for older adults with mental disorders. Most recently, the Coalition has represented aging interests in numerous forums including providing invited testimony to the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health.

The purpose of this letter is to reiterate the significant impact of mental health disorders and substance abuse on the well-being of older Americans, as documented by the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and in the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health (1999). Our goal is to encourage the 2005 White House Conference on Aging to "address mental health with the same urgency as physical health" (Recommendation 1.2, President's New Freedom Commission Report).

**c/o American Psychological Association  
Office on Aging  
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Consider these facts:

- Mental illness among older Americans is associated with increased health care utilization and costs.
- The number of older adults with mental illness is expected to double to 15 million in the next 30 years.
- The need and demand for mental health services is expected to increase because of the growing older population and the increased acceptance and utilization of mental health services by aging baby boomers.
- Almost two-thirds of older adults with a mental disorder do not receive needed services.
- Many of the mental and behavioral health problems older adults experience, such as depression and anxiety, are inaccurately attributed to "the natural aging process". This results in under-diagnosis and treatment of these conditions.
- There are effective interventions for most mental health disorders experienced by older persons. Psychotherapy, medication and other mental health treatments have been proven as effective for older persons as they are for younger persons, however stigma and accessibility present huge barriers to older adults.
- There is a strong interrelationship between physical and mental health. Older adults with medical problems such as heart disease have higher rates of depression than those who are well, and even mild depression lowers immunity and may compromise a person's ability to fight infections and cancers.
- Studies indicate that 50-70% of all primary care medical visits are related to psychological factors such as anxiety, depression, and stress.
- Preventing and treating often overlooked mental health conditions results in decreased emotional suffering, improved physical health, lessened disability, and a better quality of life for older adults and their families.

As mentioned above, the National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging hosted a WHCOA sanctioned Mini Conference on Emerging Issues in Mental Health and Aging in conjunction with the 1995 White House Conference on Aging. As our initial step in preparation for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging, we have scheduled an all day meeting of our members in September in Washington, DC at the offices of the American Psychological Association. We understand you are initiating a series of listening sessions, and would like to offer you the opportunity to hold such a session in conjunction with our next meeting in January.

In addition, we would like to request that the National Coalition be considered as a sponsor for a WHCOA pre-conference event, such as another mini-conference, and to have representation at the White House Conference itself to bring attention to this critical area of need.

Sincerely,

Sanford Finkel, NCMHA Chair, American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
Willard Mays, NCMHA Immediate Past Chair, National Association of State Mental Health  
Program Directors

Anita Rosen, Vice Chair, Council on Social Work Education

Alix McNeill, NCMHA Executive Committee Member, The National Council on Aging

Robert Bernstein, NCMHA Executive Committee Member, Bazelon Center for  
Mental Health Law

Deborah DiGilio, NCMHA Member and Staff, American Psychological Association

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>MEMBERS</b> <b>NATIONAL COALITION</b> <b>ON</b> <b>MENTAL HEALTH AND AGING</b></p>
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AARP

Administration on Aging  
Alliance for Aging Research  
Alzheimer's Association  
American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry  
American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy  
American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging  
American Association of Pastoral Counselors  
American Counseling Association  
American Geriatrics Society  
American Medical Association  
American Mental Health Counselors Association  
American Nurses Association  
American Occupational Therapy Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Society on Aging  
American Sociological Association  
Association for Ambulatory Behavioral Medicine (membership application pending)  
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
Council on Social Work Education  
Department of Veteran Affairs  
Gerontological Society of America  
Jewish Federation of Chicago  
National Academy on an Aging Society  
National Alliance for Caregiving  
National Alliance for the Mentally Ill  
National Association of Psychiatric Health Systems  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors  
National Association of State Units on Aging  
National Caucus and Center on Black Aged  
National Citizen's Coalition for Nursing Home Reform  
National Coalition of Arts Therapies Associations  
National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organization  
National Community Mental Health Care Council  
National Council on Aging  
National Depressive and Bipolar Support Alliance  
National Hispanic Council on Aging  
National Institute of Alcohol and Alcoholism  
National Institute on Aging  
National Institute of Mental Health  
National Mental Health Association  
Older Adult Consumer Mental Health Alliance  
Older Women's League  
Positive Aging Resource Center  
Psychologists in Long Term Care  
Society for Social Work Leadership in Health Care  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
Center for Mental Health Services

United Seniors Health Cooperative

**Members At-Large:**

Nancy Coleman and Leslie Fried, ABA Commission on Law and Aging

Kimberly Burton, Maryland Coalition on Mental Health and Aging

Larry Dupree, Chair, Department of Aging and Mental Health, U of South Florida

R.D. Bob Rawlings, Rawlings Consulting Services